

PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 20 June 2000
(Morning)

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PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

8th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)

*Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Iain Smith (Deputy Minister for Parliament)

WITNESSES

Hugh Flinn (Scottish Parliament Chamber Office)

Fergus Cochrane (Scottish Parliament Chamber Office)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

John Patterson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark MacPherson

ASSISTANT CLERK

Katherine Wright

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Procedures Committee

Tuesday 20 June 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

The Convener (Mr Murray Tosh): Welcome to the 8th meeting of the Procedures Committee. I begin by introducing to committee members Mark MacPherson, who is now our senior assistant clerk in place of William Venters. Mark has been with other committees in the Parliament and members may have come across him before.

Since the last meeting, our clerk, John Patterson, has been married. [*Applause.*] Members might notice a mellowing in his disposition as a consequence.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): John Patterson and Tommy Sheridan have both got married—what a coincidence.

The Convener: I do not think that it was a double header. Neither do I know whether John is going to Cuba on his honeymoon.

Rule 9.17 (Private Bills)

The Convener: Item 1 on the agenda is a report on the adequacy of rule 9.17 of standing orders. The committee is invited to note the position and agree to receive an issues paper in due course. There is a substantial annexe to the report, which identifies several concerns over procedures. It is felt that the legislation might be inoperable in its current form. We must get it into a workable form by November in case private bills are lodged. Fergus Cochrane is here to answer any questions that members may have.

Michael Russell: I was fascinated by this report. When we read the standing orders, many of us were unaware that we were going to build railways and harbours and do the other interesting things that private bills call for. It may be helpful to include in the issues paper some suggestion of the likely frequency of private bills. The experience in the House of Commons in recent years suggests that such bills will not be introduced frequently. However, some indication of their frequency would be useful, from analysis of past introductions of private bills.

The paper refers to the way in which private bills are set out, and it might help if members could see an example of a private bill. I do not think that I have ever read a private bill, therefore it would be helpful to see how one is constructed.

Those two items might help our deliberations when we receive the issues paper.

The Convener: We can ask Fergus Cochrane about that. Am I right in thinking that the recent press reports about Edinburgh Waverley station concern a private bill?

Fergus Cochrane (Scottish Parliament Chamber Officer): Yes. The Waverley private legislation is going through the private legislation system at Westminster. I could not comment on whether that matter would be appropriate for the Scottish Parliament, as I have not seen the content of the bill.

We are aware that some promoters are planning to lodge private legislation in the foreseeable future. They have been holding off until the Parliament's position became clear. We have had preliminary discussions with one or two organisations, which have said that they are planning to lodge private bills fairly shortly.

The volume of private bills has decreased over the years. On occasions in the past, there were half a dozen private bills in a year. The average number is now one or two a year, but there are three or four promoters who are planning to lodge bills.

The Convener: Essentially, the process is responsive to demand; it is not like a Government's legislative programme. A lot of private bills have been railways bills, but it would be useful to know whether the on-going transfer of powers—and a lot of them have not fully transferred yet—will bring railway procedures. If that is the case, we can anticipate that some legislation will be forthcoming from time to time. Such bills tend to involve land acquisition and compulsory purchase powers, which people in the private sector or the non-governmental world would not normally enjoy. They could, however, be reasonably significant.

Michael Russell: It would be useful if an example could be circulated to committee members. It would also help to have some indication of the frequency of private bills over the past 10 years, so that we will have some idea of what we might be talking about. It is a fascinating subject. The great days of the 19th century railways bills may be past, but it is an interesting aspect of legislation that this Parliament has not yet explored.

Fergus Cochrane: I can certainly have information passed to the convener.

The Convener: Thanks very much.

Are we agreed that we will deal with the report when we receive it in due course?

Members indicated agreement.

Annual Report

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is a draft of the annual report of this committee, which is here for approval. If anyone wants to change anything in it, or if anything has been missed that should be mentioned, now is the opportunity to do so. Are we all happy with it?

Members indicated agreement.

Privilege and Sub Judice

The Convener: Item 3 is a report on privilege. The essence of this is that we, along with everyone else, will receive the information in due course. There will be no separate report for this committee, for the reasons that are given in the paper. Are there any questions or comments on this item?

Michael Russell: I raised this issue originally. It is important that this committee discusses the issue of privilege and sub judice, as well as members being informed about it. It is not an absolute, and even in this area of law there are opinions to be had about it. Although I understand that members need advice urgently, it would be wise to allow us to discuss these papers at a future date.

The Convener: John, will these papers come to us as drafts?

John Patterson (Clerk Team Leader): No. The information will be circulated to each member. There is nothing to prevent the committee deciding to discuss the drafts in due course, as Michael Russell has suggested.

The Convener: Are we agreed to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Parliamentary Business

The Convener: Item 4 is a paper by Donald Gorrie. I shall ask you to speak on this in a moment, Donald. I appreciate the effort that you have put into it, especially in working through the amendments to standing orders that would be necessary. This report is slightly premature in our work programme, as both committee work and legislation are in the forward work programme anyway, and I do not think that we want to initiate action on points in advance of the completion of that work. That is a pitch for you to make.

I have been involved with the legislative process, having followed the Rural Affairs Committee's scrutiny of the National Parks (Scotland) Bill, and my views are broadly similar to those in the paper. However, I am conscious that not every committee has dealt with legislation, and that members may feel that some of the points in the report are premature—not because they are wrong in any way, but simply because not everyone has yet had the experience from which to derive either the conclusions that are contained in the report or different conclusions.

With that caveat, I invite Donald Gorrie to make a few comments on the paper.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I am not sure whether some of the problems outlined in the paper are within the remit of this committee or that of the Parliamentary Bureau. Ultimately, they are in the hands of the Parliament. I accept that some issues may take a while to enter the system, but some of them could be dealt with more rapidly. If the Parliamentary Bureau acted on even some of the suggestions, that would be a step in the right direction.

We have previously discussed the role of the Presiding Officer as the business manager of the Parliament, with responsibility for answering questions on its building and so on. There should also be a time for the Government's business manager to answer questions. One of the most profitable times in the Westminster week is when the Leader of the House of Commons announces the business and answers questions. We need not slavishly copy that model, but there should be an opportunity for members to ask about timetabling decisions and for the Minister for Parliament to explain the thinking behind them.

I have some points about the general conduct of the Parliament. I have spoken to several people who agree with me. We have too many debates and some of the shorter debates are rather pointless. Many debates are on anodyne motions. Either the Executive lodges a motion in which it tells us how marvellously it is running the health

service and the Opposition speaks to an amendment saying how awful it is, or there is an Opposition motion that says how awful the health service is and an Executive amendment saying how marvellous it is, none of which gets us very far.

We could examine the way in which we use our time. If we had fewer but longer debates, it might improve the situation. The current structure tends to exclude back benchers. The people involved in the committees, who know most about the subject and want to speak about it, get first kick of the party ball. However, there may be other members who are not in the committee who could make a useful contribution; often those members do not get in because there is a limited amount of time for back benchers. If we had fewer but longer debates, there would be more time for back benchers to contribute. Although it is good not to have great long speeches as they do at Westminster, four minutes per speech is rather tight, particularly if a member takes interventions.

I have some proposals on the timetable for bills. Like you, convener, I have been involved in the process of one bill, which will have its final session tomorrow. It seems to me that the way in which we deal with bills is rather like those cycle races on a track: people cruise around gently for several laps and then there is a helter-skelter sprint at the finish. We have quite a relaxed time scale for pre-legislative scrutiny, but as soon as the legislative process begins, the timetable is very tight and there is little chance to examine the wording of amendments to decide whether they meet one's requirements.

I suggest that there should be a deadline for lodging amendments, but that there should be three days' grace to allow members to adjust or withdraw those amendments. Often the sense of an amendment is quite good, but members disagree to it because it is allegedly badly drafted and the minister has said that the idea is quite good but that the lawyers advise the Executive that the roof would fall in if it were to be agreed to. However, if there had been more time to adjust the amendment, it might have been agreed to.

We could improve the way in which we operate in several areas. I suggest that we open correspondence with Tom McCabe on the issue of question time for the Minister for Parliament. We could send an end-of-term circular to MSPs, asking about their experiences and views on some of those issues. That would inform us whether there is widespread support for my ideas.

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): Donald Gorrie said that many of those matters might best be addressed to the Parliamentary Bureau. He has raised many issues, some of which—I say this with all due respect—are simply

personal thoughts. I have such thoughts every day, but I do not feel moved to present them in a paper to a committee.

On the point that he raised about stage 2 timetabling, I think that it is rather early in the legislative programme to start going into that level of detail. We have not had the benefit of dealing with a lot of bills. I accept the point about bills being rushed at stage 2 for various reasons, but sometimes timetables have to be adhered to and sometimes the Parliament has to be seen to make progress. A lot of things need to be taken into consideration.

We need more bills to go through before we can see whether there are identifiable criticisms that the committee can say are a problem and so we can ask how they should be addressed. It is a bit early to get into that at the moment. Most of the other points that Donald Gorrie made are best addressed by the Parliamentary Bureau. Will he clarify whether when he talks about anodyne debates he is talking about Executive motions specifically or about Opposition motions as well?

10:15

The Convener: They tend to be abrasive rather than anodyne.

Donald Gorrie: Neither advances the public good very much.

Janis Hughes: Is that something that this committee can address, convener? Are we going to be prescriptive about the topics that the Opposition parties, in particular, can put down for debate?

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Opposition parties or the Executive.

Michael Russell: To be fair.

The Convener: Again, the matter is premature. On quite a few occasions in the past year, we have sensed that we are talking about a subject again. Some of the debates have not really been for any visible purpose or output. To a degree, we have been treading water while awaiting the arrival of legislation. It may well be that once we have a full working year with legislation in committees and committee reports coming out, the aspect of some of our debates filling time will die a natural death. Nevertheless, it is valid to point out to the bureau that some of the debates seem to lack a little bit of focus and that the time might be reallocated for subjects that are likely to arouse more interest among members.

I am conscious of the points raised by Donald Gorrie about the lack of opportunity for back benchers and the four-minute speech. I hear people criticise in the chamber, saying that they

have been waiting to get to speak and have not been able to, that the minister was allocated 18 minutes and took 22 minutes, that the front benchers dominated the debate or that there was not an opportunity for other people to get in. Those concerns are widespread. There may be a purpose in asking the bureau to reflect on that and possibly in doing a survey of members' attitudes.

One of the Parliament's fundamental principles was sharing the power. Sharing means sharing the time and the opportunity. If there is a sense among MSPs that the system is not working properly, it is appropriate for us to consider it. It is not necessarily something that means changing standing orders; it may be something for the Parliamentary Bureau or the Presiding Officer to clarify.

Michael Russell: There are many important points in the paper. I am slightly tempted to tell the old joke and say that it is good and original, but that what is good is not original and what is original is not good. A lot of the points are already being addressed. Janis Hughes is absolutely correct in saying that the right place to address many of the points is the Parliamentary Bureau. I do not think that it is giving away secrets to say that the bureau discusses debates and agonises about many of the points raised. I want to pick up on one or two of these points.

On the question of people not being taken and the length of speeches, there should be a solid allocation of time for back-bench speakers if front benchers stick to the time that they are given. The latest changes we made to speaking times in the hour-long debates were made deliberately to allow extra time for back-bench speeches. That is a chairing issue, rather than an issue for the bureau. If front benchers stick to their time, there should always be time for back benchers. The question of whether speeches by back benchers are four, five, six or seven minutes is a question for back benchers, but the longer the speeches, the fewer people will get in. If people want six or seven minutes, they will have to reconcile themselves to the fact that fewer people will be called. Until now, the view in the bureau has been to try to call as many people as possible.

Some months ago, a set of statistics was drawn up on people who had not got in and the time of speeches, which indicated that far fewer people were not getting in now than a year ago. With your permission, convener, I suggest that John Patterson might like to talk to the clerk to the Parliamentary Bureau to see whether those figures could be provided to this committee and perhaps updated. They will indicate that progress has been made in this matter.

The suggestion of an Executive business manager's question time is superficially attractive.

However, surely that runs contrary to the way in which this Parliament has been set up? It is not about things being done behind the Speaker's chair and one minister taking responsibility in the chamber. There is a Parliamentary Bureau that consists of representatives of the four parties, who are meant to decide on the business in a consensual manner.

If we were to call Tom McCabe to the chamber every week, every two weeks or every three weeks to answer for the decisions that have been made, for whom would he be answering? Would he be answering for me, as a member of the bureau and the Opposition, or would he be answering for the Executive? In the latter case, he would not be representing fully what took place in the bureau.

The bureau minutes are not published at present, and we may need to address that. The standing orders state specifically that meetings of the bureau should take place in private, but perhaps the minutes should be made more widely available. However, at the heart of the consultative steering group principles is a consensual approach to deciding the Parliament's business.

On committee days, there is an opportunity for debates on subjects. Committees can propose debates on subjects, and there is no need for amendments. I think that it is helpful if committee reports are not amended, and if there is an opportunity for the chamber to discuss a subject as opposed to a motion. Perhaps we need more committee days, although this year we have had some difficulty filling the existing days.

The convener made the important point that this is the Parliament's first year. There have been mistakes and some things have not worked. The Executive admits that bills have been introduced too late and that there has been back-end pressure on committees and the chamber. Hardly any bills were introduced before Christmas, and the result is that bills have been rushed through.

I have repeatedly requested a better timetabling of bills, so that bills are introduced early and there is more time to consider them. I am not unique in that. I would be very annoyed if this time next year there was the same legislative pressure on committees and the chamber. However, we should remember that bills do not fall at the beginning of the summer recess; they go on. Parliamentary draftsmen, ministers and others have not fully realised that we need a rolling programme of bills.

It is a good idea to list members who have asked to speak in a debate and have not been called. I see no difficulty with that, and it would indicate when members wanted to speak. However, those statistics are already kept. If we examine the figures, we will find that fewer

members who want to speak in a debate are not being called.

The one point on which I agree profoundly with Donald Gorrie relates to his proposed amendment to standing orders rule 9.10.6. I do not think that the wording is appropriate, but I agree that members face considerable problems in drafting amendments, particularly amendments to legislation. The Executive has a very big advantage in that respect. Donald Gorrie referred to ministers rejecting amendments for technical reasons. The ace minister for doing that was Peter Peacock. During consideration of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill, on every occasion he said, "Good idea, but badly drafted"—a civil service excuse.

We deal with that not by having the chair allow endless manuscript amendments, which would become incredibly messy—members would not know what they were debating—but by providing members with high-level assistance in drafting. We need a more consensual approach that would enable civil servants, even civil servants in the relevant subject department, to help members to draft appropriate amendments. At some stage, this committee will have to consider how that can be achieved.

I would be delighted if Donald Gorrie's paper were passed to the bureau. However, some parts of the paper misunderstand the nature of the organisation in which we are working. Other parts express legitimate concerns, but it would be wrong to imply that those concerns are not shared by the bureau and many other people and are not the subject of constant discussion. The solution to those problems is not as straight line as this paper would suggest.

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): I endorse those comments. Michael Russell has dealt with many of the points that I wanted to make, so there is no point in rehearsing them.

For clarification, convener, could you say whether, if the paper is referred to the Parliamentary Bureau, that will be done in a neutral manner? I would not like our passing the paper on to be interpreted as an endorsement of it.

The Convener: Two things will come from the paper. First, the points that it makes will be noted and held against on-going committee work on changes to standing orders, the legislation review and the committee practice review. Secondly, all the points that have been made, apart from those that we intend to deal with ourselves, will be referred to the bureau for consideration.

I would like us to refer all Donald Gorrie's points to the bureau for a response, without deleting any because we happen not to agree with his

recommendation. It is perfectly possible that the bureau may feel that it wishes to clarify some of the issues, make specific responses or change some practices.

Mr Kerr: I am not sure whether that answers the question. Does that mean that by passing on the paper, we are supporting it, or do we hold a neutral view on its content?

The Convener: We will send an extract from the discussion. It will be clear that some committee members have approved some parts of it and others have suggested that some parts of it do not meet with their support. The bureau will get from that the sense that it is not a committee report. In a sense, the committee is asking the bureau to respond before we take a decision on it.

The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Iain Smith): I am sure that there is no problem with passing it to the bureau to consider the points that are relevant to the bureau.

I wish to make a few specific points.

First, Mike Russell has covered quite a lot of this, but a point to bear in mind is that the Executive does not control the entire business of the plenary sessions. That is why the question of the Executive business manager question time is probably not appropriate. Almost a third of plenary sessions are in the hands of the Opposition parties or the committees: 28 sessions out of about 111 in a full parliamentary year.

Secondly, on the subject of short debates, one of the problems is the one-and-a-half hour slot on a Thursday afternoon. It is difficult to work out what business to put forward to utilise that slot. That could be addressed at the same time as the issue of where question time should be positioned in the week. Thursday is used for that for a number of reasons, not least to do with broadcasting, but it means a short debating slot.

Thirdly, Mike Russell commented that statistics have been presented to the bureau about the number of members not called in debates, which indicate that, following the introduction of the new speaking times agreed by the business managers, fewer members have been called than previously. It is worth asking the bureau to keep a view on that.

Finally, Mike Russell's point about the timetabling of bills was well made—that issue is accepted by the Executive. It was not deliberate that bills did not appear until later on. The Executive discovered that pressures over time were greater than expected; it is making an effort to timetable bills over the next session better than they were timetabled in the current one.

Having said that, before the summer recess, we should have passed 11 Executive bills out of 15,

which will be quite a good record for the Parliament in its first year.

The Convener: I think we know where we are going. I shall give Donald Gorrie the opportunity to close, if he wants to take it.

Donald Gorrie: Thank you. I am happy that the matter progresses as you indicated.

If there is a difficulty about an hour-and-a-half slot, what about using it for members' business motions? There are a lot of good ones and there is a queue to get in. Some of the time could be used for that.

I do not accept two of Mike Russell's arguments. It is quite possible for Tom McCabe to answer questions on behalf of the bureau—the decisions are made collectively—but the bureau should be the servant of the Parliament. At the moment, there is no way for the Parliament to put pressure on the bureau.

It is difficult to say this non-offensively, but given the way that human beings work, it is quite possible that the bureau, which represents the four main parties, will become a sort of collective that tends to work in its own way and that does not necessarily represent the views of the Parliament as a whole. The Parliament should have some way of scrutinising that and it is quite reasonable for the leading member of the bureau to answer questions.

I do not accept the argument that the overall length of time of debates is irrelevant. One of my suggestions for reducing the number of debates on issues was to allow more time for debates on bills, which are grossly over-curtailed. The overall timetabling is important. More people could get in and there would be slightly more time for speeches if there were fewer, longer—and therefore better—debates.

I am very happy to continue this matter. If these views are widely shared, there is not much point in muttering about them over cups of coffee. Let us put them on the table and find out where people agree.

10:30

Michael Russell: Although I entirely agree with Donald that checks and balances should be observed, every week we have an opportunity to challenge the business motion, which represents the principal decisions of the Parliamentary Bureau. A procedure is set down for it. I think that I am one of only two people who have opposed the business motion, and I am a member of the bureau. Last week, Donald Gorrie challenged a timetabling motion—in my view, quite correctly, given what happened that afternoon. Although I share the responsibility for having been involved in

the decision, I think that, last week, Donald was wise to anticipate the difficulties that we discovered. That said, the claim that there is no opportunity to challenge the decisions of the bureau should not go unchallenged; there is an opportunity to do so every week, and quite often twice a week.

The Convener: That will appear in the *Official Report*—Mike Russell has thrown down the gauntlet and Donald Gorrie will not be slow to pick it up.

Michael Russell: I am delighted to give out that information. That is why the procedure is there.

The Convener: The bureau might also reflect on the difficulty of slotting anything substantive into the hour and a half on a Thursday afternoon. Sometimes the Thursday mornings seem to drag on for a very long time.

Michael Russell: That only happens when there are Tory motions.

The Convener: Actually, it is not really a problem on Opposition days, because Opposition parties now timetable two topics in the morning. It is the three-hour debates that sometimes flag a little; perhaps there is scope for reviewing the allocation of time between morning and afternoon sessions. I simply throw that suggestion in as something that the bureau might reflect on when it considers all the other matters that have been raised. Are members satisfied that we have thrashed the matter out sufficiently?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We note the paper. The Presiding Officer reads all the committee reports—he says—and perhaps we should flag this report up to him as one that he might examine closely, as some points have been made about the management of debates.

Michael Russell: It is important that, when the paper is sent to the bureau, the *Official Report* of this discussion is included for the two bureau members who are not here.

The Convener: Otherwise the demonstration of bureau solidarity has been noted and much appreciated.

Michael Russell: And it will be very short-lived.

Correspondence

The Convener: The next item is simply a note of the letter that I sent to Sir David Steel, inviting him to reflect on our points about allocating some time to question him on matters of exceptional importance in his remit. Are members happy to note that?

Members indicated agreement.

Languages

The Convener: The sixth item on the agenda concerns the resource implications of extending the use of non-English languages for parliamentary business. We have a fairly substantial report on the matter. Lesley Beddie is present, so if we have any questions, we can ask her to come to the table and deal with them. The essence of the report is that we invite the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to discuss the issues that arise and to take appropriate action.

Michael Russell: This report is very welcome, convener. It moves the matter along in the right direction after our early discussions and I am particularly pleased about what it says on lodging amendments in another language. The example of the Gaelic amendment is useful, and will be even more useful when the Parliament actually passes a Gaelic amendment.

I have a small issue to raise about announcements in the bulletin. The first paragraph on the second page of annexe C of the report says:

"The expectation is that this provision will be used infrequently. There are considerable resource implications for the Parliament".

That is somewhat grudging. I would be happier if the sentence was phrased, "The expectation is that this provision will be used appropriately as there are considerable resource implications for the Parliament." Expecting the provision to be used infrequently suggests to people, "Do you really want to do that?" We should be saying to people that, if they want to use the provision, we are happy to let them do so, but there are resource implications. It is simply a matter of changing "infrequently" to "appropriately" and eliding the sentences.

The Convener: That is a minor manuscript amendment. I think that there is little difficulty with that. What is it in Gaelic, Michael?

Michael Russell: We could ask Norman Campbell over there. He is better at a quick translation than I am.

Mr Kerr: I thought that you were doing classes.

Michael Russell: Yes, but he is much better than I am.

The Convener: We do not want you to pass this off to him. We want your response.

Michael Russell: I would be abused if I got it wrong. Norman Campbell is the expert.

The Convener: We will not involve him. The committee would like to see you thoroughly

abused more often, but that is another matter. Are there any questions arising from the report?

Janis Hughes: The significant part of the report is on the first page, where the words "resource implications" appear in italics. The paper raises several serious resource implications. For example, allowing parliamentary questions in a language other than English would have serious resource implications, about which I would be concerned.

We discussed the option of sending the paper to the SPCB. Are we sending it to the SPCB without endorsing it? We need to send it to the SPCB and we need to iron out the resource implications. I would be concerned if we told the SPCB that this is what we wanted and that we hoped that it would furnish us with it.

On annexe C, I am not convinced that announcements in the business bulletin are the best way in which to proceed on an issue such as this. The business bulletin seems to get bigger and bigger every day, which in itself raises resource implications. We have electronic mail facilities, so why can this information not be circulated by e-mail?

The Convener: Janis Hughes's point about whether the paper goes to the SPCB with the committee's explicit support is a fair one. Some months ago, the fact that we referred a matter to the bureau was translated in the subsequent debates and in the papers as a bid from the Procedures Committee to promote signage throughout the parliamentary complex.

Some of the points that have been raised are the logical follow-through from recommendations, approvals and decisions that we made previously, but others are new initiatives. They all have resources implications. We do not control the budget or have an overview of the correct use of scarce resources, but the corporate body does. In that spirit, we would like the corporate body to look at these issues and to consider whether and where there are achievable ways—at a reasonable cost—in which we can advance the interests of those who are keen to promote the languages in question. We have to respect the corporate body's control over resources. We are not telling the corporate body what to do; we are asking it to consider these issues.

Michael Russell: We are asking it to do so in the context of the paper, which, in paragraph 4, says:

"This Parliament is committed to the principle of equal opportunities throughout its work. The proper husbanding of resources is important also."

In the spirit of both of those sentences, the matter should be passed to the corporate body.

Iain Smith: In answer to Janis Hughes's point about the publication in the bulletin, a procedural issue such as this has to be published in the bulletin because there have to be opportunities to refer to it, if people are not following the guidance. The business bulletin is part of the official documentation of the Parliament. It can be accessed by non-members through the website, which is equally important.

The Convener: Many people outside the Parliament use the bulletin. Not all of them can get the information quickly by e-mail or on the internet.

Iain Smith: There is also the option for members not to take hard copies of the bulletin, but just to read it on the website.

The Convener: We will put that out as a recommendation from Iain Smith, but not from the rest of us—I am sure that it will be popular.

Rule 9.10.7 (Amendments to Bills)

The Convener: We move to item 7, which relates to a point that Donald Gorrie raised and which has been specifically referred to us by the Presiding Officer. It arises directly from recent experience in relation to the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill.

We all appreciated the way in which the Presiding Officer handled what happened and allowed the will of the Parliament to be fulfilled. We would be advised to commission a report on the matter, examining all the implications. We especially want to examine what would happen if there were not a unanimous desire in the Parliament to allow a manuscript amendment to be debated. We have to come up with a mechanism to test whether there is a majority view. It would be wrong if one person could block a manuscript amendment that everybody else wanted, but we would have to work out how many members it would take to block a manuscript amendment. A lot of practical problems need to be addressed.

Donald Gorrie: I suggest that the point that Michael Russell made in the previous discussion is relevant. If there were a better system of helping members to draft legally and administratively sound amendments, the problem would not arise.

The Convener: We can make the change to the standing orders quite quickly—if we give ourselves time to examine the issues—but the issue of how we build on the relationship between staff, members of Parliament and the Executive civil servants in the working up of amendments will take longer to resolve and might be difficult.

Iain Smith: It is possible for members with draft amendments to consult the minister responsible for the bill in an attempt to ascertain whether the amendment is acceptable. That might not work in all cases, but it is worth trying. In the case that we are discussing, it might have been possible for the draft amendment to have been amended before it was lodged, which would have avoided the need for a manuscript amendment.

The Convener: It would be useful if the Executive made members aware of that. It is certainly news to me. I am sure that I have the information somewhere in my paperwork and that, if I read and absorbed everything that landed on my desk, I would be aware of it. I would have benefited from knowing about it, as would other members who lodged perfectly good amendments that were knocked back because an eagle-eyed civil servant spotted an unintended implication in the wording. Many members would use the

mechanism if they were aware of it.

Iain Smith: This is a matter of the relationships between members and ministers.

Michael Russell: We are all finished, then.

Donald Gorrie made an important point. Murray Tosh is right to say that we are talking about a quick fix on a defective standing order, but we have to consider how we provide assistance to members to ensure that they are not caught in a trap. We should deal with that in the reasonably near future. Undoubtedly, however, there are resource implications.

The Convener: I am certain that the Parliamentary Bureau will act when it reads the discussion of the earlier report and sees for itself the concern that has been expressed. The Executive as a corporate body—if that is not a contradiction in terms—will seek ways of assisting members to grapple more effectively with this part of their remit. We should send the *Official Report* of this discussion, along with that of our earlier discussion, to the Parliamentary Bureau for its consideration.

Donald Gorrie: The time scale is as relevant as the resource issue. That is what I tried to address in my paper.

The Convener: We will accept an issues paper as soon as possible with a view to making an appropriate amendment to standing orders. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

10:45

Parliamentary Questions

The Convener: That brings us to the last item on the agenda, the draft report on written parliamentary questions. The document is substantial and raises a lot of issues.

Questions have been the centrepiece of one of the most irritating areas of friction between parliamentarians and the Executive, and I do not think that it will be easy to resolve all the points. Hugh Flinn is with us this morning, so if we hit any difficulties he will be able to explain how the chamber desk tries to cope with the problems that have arisen. Iain Smith will of course take full responsibility for everything that the Executive does or does not do.

The report is in front of you. I am sure that you have all read it and thought about it and would now like to take advantage of this session to have your say.

At the heart of the matter is the way in which the Executive handles an increasingly large volume of questions and whether it is legitimate for further resources to be allocated to handling them. The other important question is whether any members abuse the system—overworking the system might be a better way of putting it. We need to know whether there are methods or procedures that could be put in place to avoid such overwork.

There is a bit of tension here, but the real issue is that members need information and want responses reasonably quickly, and the Executive is clearly worried about the volume of work arising from that demand.

Janis Hughes: I would like clarification that appendix 1 on page 39 shows the number of written questions lodged per MSP per month. Is it physically possible to lodge 330 questions in a month?

The Convener: I do not think that that is a monthly total. This is not our document, but an Executive paper.

Mr Kerr: That is a monthly total.

Gordon Jackson (Glasgow Govan) (Lab): Three hundred and thirty questions in a month? Surely not. It must be a cumulative total.

The Convener: There have been months in which more than 1,000 questions have been asked.

Gordon Jackson: But that makes 3,665.

The Convener: You have done a quick mental calculation, have you?

Gordon Jackson: I just read the total at the bottom of the list.

The Convener: I see; you looked over the page.

Michael Russell: What does this page refer to? I assumed that it was a monthly total.

Iain Smith: It is the number of questions lodged in the period up to the end of January.

The Convener: It covers the first nine months of working. Paragraph 2 of annexe F on page 38 explains that, in the first nine months, 3,665 questions were lodged.

Michael Russell: So the document should be reheaded?

The Convener: That is right.

Janis Hughes: Thank you for clarifying that. We have talked about people asking questions requesting information that is already in the public domain. Some of the answers, certainly in recent months, have said, "This information is available from . . ." Is there a case for providing training for clerks, so that they can advise members about that? I accept that there may be some MSPs whom clerks might not be happy to advise to go to the Scottish Parliament information centre or to other sources of information for an answer, but we could probably cut the number of questions.

Reading some of the questions, I find it amazing that some members ask for information that is readily available. That applies only to the issues that I know about off the top of my head; I am sure that other information is available if one digs a bit deeper. Is there a case for giving clerks some sort of training to advise members about that?

The Convener: We shall raise that point with Hugh Flinn. Has the chamber desk or SPICe done any work to identify whether a proportion of the burden of questions could be readily resolved without asking the Executive?

Hugh Flinn (Scottish Parliament Chamber Office): SPICe has done some analysis of how many questions over a certain period it could have answered wholly, and the result was a very small number indeed. There was a rather larger number of questions for which SPICe could have provided some information, but not the whole answer.

The Convener: I appreciate that inspired questions do not involve the same work load, because they relate to something that the Executive is doing anyway. Was an estimate made of the proportion of inspired questions in this total?

Hugh Flinn: No.

The Convener: Does the Executive monitor that?

Iain Smith: The Executive monitors the overall number of questions, but it does not have any specific information on inspired questions.

Michael Russell: The paper is well drafted and of great interest, but it is a sort of holding report. It does not take us very far down the road in one direction or the other. It is carefully balanced between the position that some in the Executive take—that there are plenty of nuisances out there who are asking an awful lot of nuisance questions that could be answered elsewhere—and the position of some SNP members, with which I have more sympathy. They feel that the Executive will often do anything to avoid answering a question.

These are still early days. The report's proposal to examine the issue again before March 2001, when we have fuller information on how we are doing, is not a bad one. At the moment, written questions do not specify the date on which they were lodged, which would be a good reference point. Every time an answer was published—holding or otherwise—it would enable us to see when the question had been lodged. That would allow people to make their own assumptions, because if a question were recorded as lodged today, 20 June—days pass so quickly that I had almost forgotten the date—and the answer was published in September, it would be clear that it had taken a long time for that answer to appear. That is one small technical adjustment, which we could make immediately and which would help us to analyse the statistics. Instead of having to go back to the source documentation, the clerks would be able to tell at a glance when the question had been lodged.

Mr Kerr: Scrutiny and asking probing questions to get answers that constituents or organisations need are important activities. However, a quick tally shows that six members on the list have a total in three figures; the rest of us are in two figures or less. The coverage that this issue has had in the media and the airing that it has been given in the chamber and elsewhere may act as a braking mechanism on some of the people who are asking questions.

Michael Russell: No way.

Mr Kerr: I see Mike Russell's reaction, and I may be being optimistic—

Michael Russell: The media coverage should not act as a braking mechanism.

Mr Kerr: I disagree. I have a problem with a member asking 330 questions. If Mike Russell would like, we can go through those questions to ascertain whether they could have been asked elsewhere, whether they were valid questions and whether the member could have found out the answers by other means, at less cost to the Parliament and to the taxpayer. We can argue

about the pros and cons, but there are six people who have asked 100 questions or more—

Janis Hughes: Seven.

Mr Kerr: I have been corrected by my colleague. The rest of us have asked somewhere between zero and 99 questions. The number of questions asked by some members is exceptional. We need to identify ways of dealing with that. When asked by the press to comment on this issue, I have always defended members' right to ask questions of the Executive, and I will continue to do so. However, there is a clear suggestion that some members are asking an excessive number of questions. We need to address that.

Mr Paterson: I want to pick up on Andy Kerr's point about the cost. How are we to get questions answered? Are we supposed to go to a book shop for the answer and to get it to invoice us, even when the staff to answer questions are already in place? I am confused by the point that the Labour party constantly makes about how much it costs to answer questions. Is it suggesting that we should not ask questions so that we can sack people whose role is redundant? That would not happen. Those people would be rolled into working for the Executive.

Mr Kerr: That is pathetic

Mr Paterson: No, it is not pathetic. This is what the Parliament is about—we are talking about the checks and balances in the Parliament. The opportunity to question and hold the Executive to account is limited in any case, although sometimes an awful lot of questions need to be asked to get an answer. I raised that issue before. The quality of some of the answers that we receive beggars belief.

I am all for people being responsible—that is a reasonable demand to make. I am very responsible in the questions that I ask. It is not responsible to ask no questions or few questions. If we are doing our job correctly, criticism should be focused on someone who does not ask any questions. According to the figures, we seem to be doing quite well. Parliamentary questions cost Westminster £267 each whereas they cost the Scottish Parliament £100 each. However, I do not agree with that figure of £100. The people are in place—if they are not answering questions, what are they doing?

The Convener: That is a bit unfair. I agree that some of the calculations are a wee bit suspect, as the staff are all in place. However, the work is clearly done at a cost, as staff who answer questions are not doing other things that make up their work load. That must be taken into the equation when considering the practical aspects of the system. I am less impressed by the figure that is being bandied about than I am worried that

people might be tied up in carrying out unnecessary work.

I draw members' attention to paragraph 4 on pages 5 and 6 of the paper. We do not have a detailed calculation, but we tried to make a comparison between what happens at Westminster and what happens in this Parliament. Here, one member has asked 330 questions, while another member has asked two questions. However, the average number of questions asked in this Parliament seems to be pretty well in line with the number that are asked at Westminster. What has changed with this Parliament is that the volume of work that is being done by the Scottish Executive has increased.

At our previous meeting, we received evidence of the fact that the number of letters that are being written and answered has also increased. That is either to be regarded as a problem or as one of the successes of devolution. That is what devolution was meant to achieve: the opening up of one of the remoter Westminster departments to effective scrutiny. Therefore, let us strike a balance and see the strength in the system as well as the weakness. Let us try to identify a way in which to overcome the difficulties in the system. I have ranted on a wee bit. Sorry, Iain.

Iain Smith: I understand the point that is being made about the average number of questions that are being asked. However, it should be borne in mind that the Westminster Parliament has responsibility for a broader range of areas on which questions can be asked, including social security. As well as increasing the number of questions, that widens the responsibility for answering them, which makes it easier for ministers.

The Executive welcomes the general thrust of this report and is keen to improve its performance in answering questions. Nevertheless, we should consider whether some of those questions need to be asked. If people are genuinely seeking information, asking formal questions is not always the quickest and easiest way of getting that information.

Some questions are also blatantly stupid. I do not want to name the member concerned, but one member recently asked whether the Executive would support the establishment of a Scottish office of the Financial Services Authority. The answer was that there is a Scottish office of the Financial Services Authority—the member simply had not done any basic research. I will not embarrass the member by naming her here. That sort of question does not need to be asked. It takes up everyone's time unnecessarily, when all the member had to do was look in the phone directory to find the address and telephone number of the organisation.

We must ensure that the questions that are lodged genuinely seek information that is not available from other sources and hold the Executive to account; they should not be an exercise in political machismo. Members must consider that. Unnecessary questions clog up the system and make it more difficult for members with genuine questions to get answers, as the system has to deal with all questions and not just the essential ones about ministerial responsibilities.

The Executive will do its best to answer questions as quickly and fully as possible—the clearer the questions are, the easier it is to answer them. That is another issue, as some questions are not very clear about what they are seeking. There must be a balance, and this paper tries to ensure that both sides will use the system correctly and effectively.

11:00

The Convener: I see that several members want to speak.

First, before we leave the issue, is the Executive conscious of the point that was raised about the quality of answers? Without naming names, it is clear that some ministers give precise and detailed answers, but others give terse and almost evasive answers. Some ministers do not appear to co-operate, while others treat answering questions as an important part of their job. If we are talking about levelling up the quality of the questions, it is also legitimate to talk about levelling up the quality of answers. Without asking him to name names, I would appreciate Iain Smith indicating whether the Executive attempts to provide good quality responses.

Iain Smith: If members want to give me—not in this meeting—specific examples of questions that they feel have not been properly answered, those will be looked into. The Executive tends to receive comments about answers being inadequate, but we do not get specific information that would enable us to check what the position is on those questions.

Frankly, some of the questions are not clear—the answers might not be clear because we did not understand what the question was about.

The Convener: Do you ever go back in those circumstances and ask for clarification?

Iain Smith: I do not think that we can do that. If a member lodges a question, it has to be answered. That is the rule.

The Convener: If, however, you were unclear about what is being asked, it would be sensible to phone the member to ask for a manuscript amendment.

Michael Russell: I do not want to upset the person who was involved, but I was impressed by a civil servant who rang me to seek clarification on a question that could have applied to two areas. I received a good answer because of that. The incident was so rare as to be worth commenting on.

Mr Kerr: The matter is about the need for balance, which the convener tried to strike in his comments.

I want to respond to Gil Paterson's comment. I prefaced my remarks by stating that individual members have a right and responsibility to hold the Executive to account and to ask questions that they want to ask. I suggested that several members ask more questions than others do, but the discussions that the committee is having and the coverage that the matter has had might act as a brake on those members. As I said, I do not wish to limit or inhibit the powers and responsibilities of members to ask questions, but seven members have been able to ask many more questions than others have.

Donald Gorrie: I welcome especially the informal agreement—in annexe D on page 33 of paper PR/00/8/8—on having a regular report on the timetable of questions. That issue featured in a previous paper of mine. My proposal was not exactly the same, but I think that the suggestion is a great step forward.

I am flattered to be quoted in a footnote on page 18. There are two aspects to a question: a questioner will genuinely want information, but they might also know or suspect the answer to their question and want the minister to say it, if they are not an unqualified admirer of the Administration. Part of the democratic process is to embarrass the Administration in some way, to get action.

We all work in different ways—my questions tend to arise from visits. I talk to people in colleges or voluntary organisations who might tell me that they are having a difficulty about something. I come back to Parliament and put down a question about their difficulty. I might not know much about the issue and some of the information might be available in the public domain, but it is not a huge effort for the department concerned to say that the information that was requested is in the annual report of Scottish Enterprise Lanarkshire or whatever. That is not a huge waste of people's time.

It would help if we had a seminar—a seminar for researchers is suggested in the paper. MSPs and civil servants could have a civilised discussion in which we could explore those issues—although that might break all the rules. Like Michael Russell, I have had one or two telephone calls

from people seeking clarification of what a question meant. That is helpful and could be done more often. There is a sort of Chinese wall between members and civil servants on many issues. We could do without it. If we could have a decent discussion, we might be able to begin to break down those walls. I hope that we will push the informal agreement that is suggested on page 33. I also suggest that we have some informal discussions between interested parties in order to improve the system.

The Convener: That point is extremely pertinent. The third recommendation is that MSPs be given details about Executive departments' structures, people's names and telephone numbers. It is clear that it would be helpful for us to establish an open door for members who are looking for information that they think might be in the public domain and which needs simply to be gathered. The Executive could—if it is genuinely willing to assist—be more proactive in advertising the ways in which members can access information that is in the public arena. We have heard from Hugh Flinn that SPICe's work suggests that very few parliamentary questions can be answered using only information that is held by SPICe. The superior resources of the Executive might be able to assist members in accessing information quickly. That would reduce the number of questions in the system. Only civil servants and their managers will know whether that would be a better use of their time.

Michael Russell: I want to draw attention to paragraph 22 on page 12, which says:

"This does not mean of course that the increased numbers of questions is a negative development. On the contrary, a high number of pertinent questions of high quality and relevance might be seen as good evidence of a well-engaged and hard working Parliament."

The quality and relevance of the questions might also be seen as evidence of a "well-engaged and hard working" MSP, such as the committee convener, who is one of the seven guilty men who have been mentioned, but not named by Andy Kerr. According to the statistics, the convener has lodged more than 100 questions.

We must treat the issue responsibly, but questions are not just about seeking information; as Donald Gorrie has said, there are several reasons why members lodge questions. One might ask a question to make a political point, to get an admission or to gain information to build a case that might be put to use months later. We should welcome questions in all those circumstances, as long as we believe that the system is being used responsibly. If it is not being used responsibly, we ought to know, but I see no evidence of that so far. If we are going to approve the paper, we must do so on the bases that it

represents an attempt to make the system work better and that we will return to the matter. The paper is not the last word and there is considerable dissatisfaction on all sides. The issue has been flagged up and we must wait to see what statistics emerge.

The Convener: Being called one of the seven guilty men is one of the least poisonous epithets that has been thrown at me. I have asked only 30 parliamentary questions more than the average number per member—which seems reasonable. Most of my questions refer to my transport brief. I am not defending myself—rather, I am simply making the point that many members use questions extensively to get at information and to make points about Executive policy and the way in which it goes about its business. I would not like the work of the Procedures Committee to be seen as an attempt to curb that. As Andy Kerr said, some members ask an awful lot of questions and some of that information could be found elsewhere. In the cases of one or two members there might be an argument for restraint, but I repeat—even if one or two members could ask fewer questions, members of the Parliament do not ask, on average, a huge volume of questions. We are entitled to continue to work with the Executive to see how it reorganises and reallocates its internal resources to handle questions.

Questions are only the tip of the iceberg; letters must also be answered. Sometimes we are asked to write letters instead of ask questions, but I am not sure about that. Answering a question—especially if it is a simple, silly one that can be answered easily with information that is on the record—is much less demanding than dealing with many letters. We could do with a discussion about the implications of writing letters, but exchange of letters is not done in public. It is not monitored and we cannot evaluate it—the Executive can. It might be an interesting exercise for the Executive to show why it believes letter writing is a superior means of receiving and giving information.

Mr Kerr: For the record, I do not want to be associated in any way with the comment "guilty men"—I did not use it. It was Michael Russell's comment.

The Convener: Absolutely. Michael Russell is much more allusive when bandying around such comments than Andy Kerr is. You are very circumspect.

Michael Russell: I plead guilty, but not to asking more than 100 questions. I have been a sluggard in that matter.

The Convener: There is more than one way to make mischief around Parliament, Michael.

Michael Russell: I will not take that remark as

being in any way directed at me.

The Convener: That is a judicious response—*[Interruption.]*

Michael Russell: Mr Jackson always has a comment to make—unfortunately I missed that one.

The Convener: It would be nice to have Gordon Jackson on the record on the matter.

Gordon Jackson: I find the debate about Michael Russell's point to be disingenuous. He cannot believe seriously that the number of questions lodged by some members is appropriate. I have watched members—Michael Russell, Donald Gorrie and many others—who have a huge interest in the affairs of Parliament and who have asked 30, 40 or 50 questions. There are, however, members who have asked 250 or 300 questions. I cannot bring myself to believe that that is justified. About 35 per cent of parliamentary questions have come from seven people—the top three members have asked almost 23 per cent of questions. Michael Russell says that that might indicate that they are good parliamentarians and the rest of us are not.

Michael Russell: I did not say that.

Gordon Jackson: That must mean that we should all ask that number of questions. Imagine if all members were self-indulgent to that degree. The situation would go completely berserk. Of course one cannot make rules that say that members must ask 20 questions, but Michael Russell must know that members are being inappropriately self-indulgent in their use of the questioning system.

Michael Russell: I say to Gordon Jackson that that is unfortunate—I never said that the figures prove that some members were better or worse than others were; I said that for a member to ask many questions might—in the words of the report—

“be seen as good evidence of a well-engaged and hard working”

member. There are many other ways in which to be well engaged in Parliament, but asking a lot of questions is not necessarily a sign that one is disruptive and difficult.

Gordon Jackson: I am not saying that it is disruptive or difficult. I am not attributing such a bad motive. Nor am I using the phrase “guilty men”. When a member has asked hundreds of questions, there might be a case for the member to step back and say, “Do I really need to put this amount of stuff into the system?” It is not unfair of me to suggest that.

The Convener: That is a fair point. One must always remember, however, that the question

might be valid in the eyes of the questioner. One of my colleagues was treated abusively in one of the tabloid papers for asking an allegedly ridiculous question. He had asked a question about geese on Islay. Imagine anybody asking a question on that. Of course, it is the main issue on Islay and it was a highly pertinent question. The metropolitan reporter in question—I am sure that the person is not here—simply failed to grasp the purpose of the question. One must always think, “What is the questioner after? Is that legitimate from the questioner's point of view?” I am sure that Gordon Jackson realises that. I am merely trying to introduce some balance.

Gordon Jackson: I am not criticising individual questions. We all miss things and we can all ask questions in total innocence. We can all make the mistake—as Iain Smith pointed out—of asking whether an organisation exists, when it does. That can happen to anybody. I would not criticise individual questions, but there is a feeling something is going out of step because some members have asked hundreds of questions and other members have asked nowhere near that number. I put it no more strongly than that.

The Convener: Do not say “hundreds”. Say “two hundred” or “three hundred”.

Michael Russell: I am happy to debate that matter with Gordon Jackson, but I would do so from the basis of protecting the rights of individual members. If a member thinks that a question is necessary, that is that.

The Convener: That is not being challenged.

Mr Paterson: If someone who is a lot cleverer than I am could tell me what the right number of questions is, I would listen to them. I do not think that there is a correct number—there will always be members who ask few questions and others who ask many. I do not know who are most guilty—those who ask fewer questions or those who ask more. They are doing their jobs.

As far as I am concerned, the way in which Parliament works is that if someone wants to ask 300 questions, they are entitled to do so. I would not bar members from doing that. The matter must be handled through self-regulation. Members are accountable, but not to the committee.

11:15

The Convener: I am happy to answer Gil Paterson's first question about the right number of questions. The right number is 108 in nine months. *[Laughter.]*

Michael Russell: No, the right number is somewhere between 22 and 32.

The Convener: Having heard our discussion,

does Hugh Flinn wish to say anything from the point of view of the chamber office, particularly given the work load of that office's staff? Here is an opportunity to encourage greater understanding among MSPs of the difficulties that chamber office staff sometimes face.

Hugh Flinn: I have no factual comments to add. Our experience of the volume of questions is that there was a significant increase in the period to March 2000, when over 1,000 questions were lodged. Since then, with the obvious exception of the recess, questions have continued to be lodged at about that rate, so there might be some grounds for thinking that a plateau has been reached.

Members must bear in mind that sometimes questions of admissibility are not absolutely straightforward. I think that, by and large, members appreciate that. We have had some difficulties of interpretation, particularly relating to complex issues such as benefits and asylum seekers, which are reserved matters whose administration falls within the Executive's general responsibilities. If I have a plea, it is that members bear with chamber office staff when we examine those issues before admitting a question.

The Convener: There are three recommendations on pages 22 and 23 of the draft report. The first is that we note and approve the agreement between the Parliament and the Executive, which can be found in annexe D of the document. That agreement is a clear statement of good intent that working practices and so on be worked on and improved.

Michael Russell: Can we consider, as part of that agreement, that the date on which a question is lodged is also noted on the question? That would create no difficulties for the chamber office and it would give everyone a reference point.

The Convener: We will kick that suggestion into the system. If there are no difficulties with it, I am sure that the committee will not object to the suggestion. Perhaps some member will raise a problem that we have not anticipated, in which case we will reconsider the matter.

Donald Gorrie: Another manuscript amendment?

The Convener: Yes—another one, Donald.

The second recommendation is that we consider the possibility of holding a seminar on framing questions, which would be geared in particular at the research staff who do that work. Apparently, quite a lot of questions are framed by staff rather than by members.

The third recommendation is a repetition of the request for internal Executive telephone directories—I am sure that those are in the pipeline and are likely to appear in any event.

However, the recommendation is included as a plea for assistance to members in getting hold of officials who can give them easy answers, which will avoid unnecessary questions.

Does the committee agree to those recommendations?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The headline tomorrow might be something like "more questions than answers".

Donald Gorrie: On the second recommendation, in addition to holding an informative seminar, would it be useful for members and researchers to have informal discussions with relevant civil servants from the Executive and with some of those members who ask questions more frequently, in order to explore the issue?

The Convener: Are you asking whether we should send the boys round to see certain members? [*Laughter.*]

Donald Gorrie: No. It should not be like being sent to a headmaster's study—

Michael Russell: If members come to the seminar, they might be encouraged to write more questions—like a sort of virus.

The Convener: If some of the more critical comments were taken seriously, there would be a risk of showing certain members how to frame more pertinent and searching questions, which would cause greater difficulty. Do not rise to that comment, please.

Ladies and gentlemen, that brings us to the conclusion of our business.

Before the meeting, we tried to see whether any information was available about possible committee changes, but we were unsuccessful. We have come to the end of the term, for the committee, at least. I wish to thank all members for their contributions. I want to make that point in case the rumoured further committee changes makes it impossible for me to say that to members face to face in this particular formulation.

Janis Hughes: Aw.

The Convener: I am sure that that will not happen, but if it does I wanted to take this opportunity of thanking all members for the good humour that has been shown in our exchanges, even when they have been reasonably sharp. I also thank the committee's ever-changing staff for all their work during the past year. I do not know how long Mark MacPherson will be with us— [*Laughter.*]

I close the meeting.

Michael Russell: Before the official reporters

stop recording the meeting, I propose a vote of thanks for the convener, which will be passed unanimously.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Meeting closed at 11:20.

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